Culture clash

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NEAR the end of *Witness*, grandfather Eli says: ''He's going back to his world, where he belongs. He knows it, and you know it, too.'' For me, this quote epitomises the struggle between identity and belonging - the struggle we can have in finding our place in the world and maintaining a sense of who we are.

When we look at ourselves in the mirror each morning, who do we see? Is the face looking back at us someone we like? Do we like the nose we have been born with? What about the views and values we have been brought up to believe? What about when we do something ''wrong'', do we   
judge the face in the mirror?

*Witness* inspires contemplation and discussion about the forces that shape us and those that influence our lives and where we are going. We can learn a great deal about ourselves by looking at the actions of others.

Tough guy John Book's immersion in the Amish world provides a great opportunity for reflection. Witness highlights the universal importance of a sense of belonging and, from that, feeling secure. We understand our place in the world and our roles and responsibilities. If we know wherewe belong, we always have a sense of ''home'', literally and spiritually.

The irony is that having a sense of who we are and where we belong can also lead to friction and conflict - within ourselves and with others - and this is what Book experiences throughout the film.

Peter Weir's film presents a series of opposing forces to illuminate the struggle for the individual. Consider his view that separate worlds cannot be crossed: the Amish versus mainstream America, the archaic (old) way of life versus the modern way of life, and a non-violent world versus aviolent world.

*Witness* centres on a conflict of cultures, a conflict between the dominant culture (the civilised, urban Book) and a minority culture (Amish). Weir achieves this through cinematic tools such as contrasting colour and lighting in the different environments, the gentle (and preferred) rhythm of the farm life reflected through the long, lingering shots of the wheat and the sky, and his use of ''one shots'' that visually separate the characters, especially Book and Rachel Lapp.

In presenting these clashes, Weir makesclear his belief that assimilating and even the conscious desire to fit in can be difficult and sometimes impossible. To use the cliche: ''You can take the boy out of the country but you can never take the country out of the boy.''

Book's arrival at the farm sees him take off the officious, drab suit of the cop. He becomes ''naked'' and puts on the clothes of Rachel's dead husband. Book's ''costume'' is now conservative, functional and respectful. But can the change in clothes make him a different person?

What's interesting about Weir's use of costume is the notion that what we wear is a reflection of who we are. We judge people by the way they look. As Book lives among the Amish, he moves from being an aggressive, violent, impatient and socially isolated detective to a supportive, considerate, altruistic member of a community.

However, the ending of the film - with Book returning to ''where he belongs'' - suggests that changing what's on the outside does not necessarily change what's on the inside. Consider the scene in which Book and the Amish are confronted by the young rednecks. Though he looks Amish, Book is unable to remain patient as the crowd assaults Daniel. Book's urbanised, ''cop-world'' notions of justice and protection override his understanding of the Amish belief in pacifism and he brutally bashes the rednecks.

Book is unable to heed Eli's plea that ''it is not our way'', and Book's actions, while noble and understandable, are in complete defiance of Amish values.

Book knows he cannot stay and that his life is too removed from the life of the Amish. To deny his ingrained beliefs would be to betray who he is.

While some see the end of the film as unsatisfactory because Book and Rachel don't end up together, Weir makes a positive comment on being true to ourselves and accepting who we are in order to live a contented life.

I mentioned earlier that having a sense of belonging and a ''home'' is fundamental to our happiness. Weir shows this correlation through the use of the bird house. This simple prop comes to represent the consequences of one life ''smashing'' into another. When the injured Book arrives at the Lapp farm, he crashes into the bird house, knocking it to the ground. He literally and metaphorically destroys their home and their sense of wellbeing, and his presence creates conflict within the community, the Lapp home and, in particular, Rachel.

During the course of the film, as he begins to understand these people and their values, Book sets about rebuilding the bird house - a sign of his respect for them and for what he has ''brought'' into their home. At the end of the film, Book returns the bird house to its rightful place.

Book's greatest attribute isknowing he cannot live in this world and leaving it, even though it means leaving love and a family behind.

The film explores how Book sees the Amish, how they see him, how we see Book and how we see the Amish. Weir doesn't criticise anyone - nor is he critical of our reactions as an audience. What he does say is that we are who we are. We can be different and come from different backgrounds and accept others. We don't need to be the same. And sometimes accepting our big nose or our red hair is accepting who we are and the attributes that define us.

Changing, or possessing the desire to change, will not make us happy or loved.

Finally, as you consider the issues raised in *Witness,* think about this: in September, you will be asked to make your preferences for your life beyond school. Are you basing those choices on a passion you've had since childhood, something that's going to make you lots of money, the reputation of a tertiary institution, or what your parents want? In choosing our path, we have to find a balance that allows us to live a contented life, be loved and feel secure. The greatest advice is: ''To thine own self be true.''

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